

CORD MEYER

Vitaly Yurchenko, the KGB defector, is back among his former comrades, for better or for worse, and the guessing game goes on: why did Mr. Yurchenko do it?

Anyone can play this game, but only Mr. Yurchenko himself knows for sure why, Saturday evening a week ago, he excused himself from his CIA handlers in a busy Georgetown restaurant and re-defected to the Soviet Union.

Probably no other person — neither his CIA debriefers of the last three months nor his KGB debriefers of the months ahead — can be certain of Mr. Yurchenko's motives.

The conspiracy buffs are having a field day with the idea that he was deliberately planted on the CIA by the Soviets to embarrass President Reagan just before the Geneva summit with his charges of being drugged and kidnapped.

Mr. Reagan himself has suggested there might be something to this possibility, but the closer it is looked at by many intelligence veterans the less reliable that theory seems.

The crucial question was asked by another Soviet defector, Velena Nitroknina (alias E. Alexandra Costa in her new incarnation) on ABC's "Nightline" the other evening. Why, she asked, would a double agent sent to deceive the American authorities expose himself and give himself up just when he had won their confidence?

Mr. Yurchenko's charges of being kidnapped and drugged are inherently incredible and are hardly worth, as transient propaganda, the

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What did Soviets gain?

loss of so many vital secrets that CIA officials say he delivered to them in three months of intensive debriefing.

To this veteran of the intelligence wars, Mrs. Nitroknina-Costa's explanation, based on her own traumatic experience with the process of defection, seems much more credible than the double-agent theory. That explanation boils down to this:

Mr. Yurchenko came here as a genuine defector with the expectation of being able to get together with his old girlfriend in Canada and, in the best storybook tradition, living happily ever after. But the pressure of intense interrogation and his increasing doubts about his ability to make a new life for himself in the United States led him to change his mind.

Possibly reinforcing his decision to return to Russia was the well-publicized fact that another Soviet defector (to Britain) had re-defected and, far from disappearing into the fog and smoke, actually regained his job as a journalist. This may have raised in Mr. Yurchenko's mind the hope that he too might receive lenient treatment on his return.

Under this interpretation of events, the United States received far more of lasting value in the form of vital information from Mr. Yurchenko than the Soviets gained last week in transient propaganda.